



Advent Devotional
2021

**Written by members of Sequoia Association of the
Northern California Nevada Conference,
United Church of Christ**

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Introduction

Another Advent season under the pandemic's umbrella. Another season of waiting, when it feels like waiting is all we have done for almost 2 years. And yet, great progress has been made throughout this year of 2021. Many of us are back worshipping in person. Children as young as 5 have been approved to receive the COVID vaccine. And the anticipation of singing those beloved carols, together at last, on Christmas Eve couldn't be sweeter. The first female Vice President took office. Juneteenth was declared a National Holiday. And Simone Biles shocked the world by prioritizing her mental health over Olympic gold. We have learned to be kinder to ourselves, and to others, as we all seem to be in a more raw state of mind. There have been times when we have never felt further from God's loving grace, and yet, God is always there to comfort us when we need it most.

This Advent season, our devotional has been lovingly prepared by 17 members and friends of the Sequoia Association of the Northern California Nevada Conference. Like last year, it has been organized into 4 sections: Dreaming, Longing, Imagining, Discovering and each day has a Biblical text that accompanies it. The voices you will hear are those of hope and progress. Still journeying through these "unprecedented times" but with a bit more vigor, more purpose, more urgency for togetherness than you may have experienced in last year's writings. There are many different perspectives, and yet one true message: God is Love. It is my sincere hope that you will experience a range of emotions while you journey through Advent with us. May these writings drum up joy, peace, reflection, worry, doubt, heartbreak, and love. May they speak to your soul, and not just the "you" that you present to the outside world. May they offer you a deeper connection to God, and to one another.

Wishing you blessings for this Advent and Christmas season.

Erica Holland

Editor

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Dreaming

Sunday, November 28, 2021

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Written by: Kim Williams

Grace Community Church, UCC North Fork

I thought for sure my house was haunted. Weird noises at night, creaky floorboards, the whole business. And as I lay in bed at 1:30am for many nights in a row, I would hear it—a muffled bump bump bump bump, as though someone was wrestling on my dining room floor. Then, the TV “turned itself on.” Then, one of my kids mentioned hearing sounds at night. It was all coming together to confirm what I was already looking for. And what about that bullet hole in the kitchen window that was there when we moved in? Has anyone ever died in this house? I was a detective. I was putting the pieces together!

I heard the sounds every night for a week until I cleaned out our rabbit’s cage. In doing so, I moved it slightly forward, to where it was not up against the wall. The sounds stopped. If I listened closely though, I could hear the quiet scuffle of Bunnacula moving from one part of his spacious living quarters to the other. The ghost had been the sound of him moving around at night, amplified by the knocking of the frame of the cage against the wood-paneled walls.

What does this have to do with Jeremiah or Advent? Well, as we launch into a time of expectation and waiting, I bring this anecdote in to show how we can use scripture to back up our claims, because we comb through the prophetic texts searching for proof that Jesus is the messiah. The writers of the Gospels were not immune to proof-texting either. But what would it do to our faith if we didn’t rely on the prophets to confirm what we already know? Instead, I invite you to ask yourself, how we can lift up these scriptures as important without co-opting them for our purpose. How does the wonder of Christ’s arrival hold up on its own? Is it appropriate to appropriate (you like what I did there?) Jewish prophecy for the sake of Christian proof-texting? In what ways do we thrill at the idea of solving a mystery rather than being overwhelmed by the unknowable complexity that is the mystery?

Prayer: *Holy One,*

May we remember to take off our Sherlock Holmes hats so we can revel in the mystery of Jesus. Help us to have faith that Jesus is who we know him to be, without having to scramble for facts or proof to back it up. Build up our trust in you. Amen.

Monday, November 29, 2021

Mark 13: 24-37

Written by: Barbara Colliander

Grace Community Church, UCC North Fork

Foretelling of Christ's Coming Again – Be Alert!

These passages are a familiar Advent admonition: Watch and wait....you do not know when Christ will come again, at the end of the world. Jesus is speaking to his disciples, foretelling of the end, adding that His words will never go away, even though heaven and earth pass away.

We are asked to anticipate...to be on guard...to live and be ready for the “coming of the Son of Man”. This seems to me to be an active experience, even though we are simply asked to be “alert”. As I pondered this watchful attitude and posture, I tried expanding it to today's world. Are there situations today where we need to keep watch and be prepared? Yes, there are.

I have been reading Valerie Kaur's “See No Stranger” and am struck by her admonition to be ready to act toward just causes. She challenges us to select our “sword and shield”: talk with others, write letters, march, witness and document, just SHOW UP. However, it is not the sword of violence, but rather the sword of action. Summing it up in her words: “You don't have to know the answers. You just have to be ready for the moment when the world says: “*Now.*” Then we act on our passion for justice in the best way we are able.

This might be expanding too much on the theme of keeping watch, but it spoke to me as a call to action!

Tuesday, November 30, 2021

Isaiah 40: 1-11

Written by: Carol Visitacion

United Japanese Christian Church, Clovis

Norman Broadbent: “God is music.”

John Cage: “Everything is music.”

Isaiah, the prophet, told us many years ago to behold God and be in wonder. “Prepare the way of the Lord.” In the midst of our daily worries, I’ve forgotten about him many times. We worried about things at church. We worried about feeding people; Too much? Not enough? We worried about going out into the community rather than staying in our “safe” buildings. We worried about reaching out to our neighbors, to people on the other side of the world. We worried about equity in education to those without internet during Covid. “We” may not include you, but I am humbled. The Lord in one fell swoop put us out of our buildings, took away all thoughts of making refreshments for Sunday worship, and being locked away in a building and not in a community. I know better people than I went into action, amassing and delivering food. They bought much needed items, and hard to find items for those who did not drive. They delivered meals to those who were in need. I know all of your churches and your people reached out to neighbors in need, to front line responders, the infirm, the elderly, the young, physically and spiritually giving comfort. There were daily miracles of aiding each other.

From the recollection of one humble and hard-working retired doctor (who unselfishly tends our garden,) his father first attended church under a tree. To the gratefulness of a group of people whose elderly did not speak English, who had to rely on their children for translation as many before and many ethnic groups after, we are in awe. We thank the Salvation Army who included us and are sad at the hardships our parents went through in their orphanages, as their parents fought tuberculosis. We yearn to share the words of hope that Jesus gave us. We cannot wait to tell of the daily miracles we meet, see, and interact with in our children and in the people in line with or without masks. I am amazed at students who are now grown and recognize us with masks on. Our children are our miracles, whether they are ours by birth or in a class. Jesus walked among us. Isaiah foretold of his coming. We are so amazed and bow down. We are moved to act. The beauty of the earth, the people and their acts in the face of adversity is amazing. The way atoms are charged and link and break apart according to God’s rules, oblivious to our politics, makes us thankful. Bless your health and travels. Amen.

Wednesday, December 1, 2021

Isaiah 35: 1-10

Written by: Peter Wall

First Congregational Church of Fresno

In this passage from Isaiah, the desert blooms, the weak are strong, the fearful are fearless, the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame leap, the speechless sing, the desert is wet, and hot sand becomes cool water. In short, the world is turned upside down and inside out.

But what is happening in verse 8? (Do go read it, if you haven't already.)

The first half of the verse is plain enough: there is a highway, called the Holy Way, or the Way of Holiness, or the Sacred Way, depending on which translation you read.

The second half of the verse is murkier. Many bibles note that the Hebrew here is "uncertain."

In the King James Version, we read of this Holy Way that "the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein." Read that a few times.

In the New International Version, "it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it."

In Robert Alter's translation, "No unclean one shall pass over it, but it shall be for him who goes on the way, and fools shall not wander there."

And here is the New Revised Standard Version (using the alternate phrases from its footnotes): "the unclean shall not pass it by, but it shall be for them; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray."

So what is this Holy Way? Is it something that the "unclean" will not pass over, or is it specifically for them, so that they will not pass it by? Is the Holy Way for anyone who walks on it? Do the unclean become holy by walking on it?

And what about those fools? Is the Holy Way so obvious that even fools will not lose it? Or is the Holy Way a place that one goes to get away from all the wandering fools? Or is the Holy Way a place where no one is really wandering, not even the fools?

Is the Holy Way an exclusive path? Or an inclusive one?

Clear as mud? Are you turned upside down and inside out yet?

If so, then maybe you are ready to dream. (And maybe you are on the Holy Way. How does the world look from there?)

Thursday, December 2, 2021

Psalm 72

Written by: Larry Honda

United Japanese Christian Church, Clovis

“May all kings bow down to him and all nations serve him.” (Psalm 72: 11)

Our broken world is ruled by “wanna-be” kings, but Psalm 72 tells us of the perfect king who was, is, and will ever be governing perfectly. He will bring justice, righteousness, and prosperity (v. 1-3) that human leaders may promise, but ultimately cannot deliver. We wait patiently for the king that earthly rulers will bow down to; the king who will deliver the needy who cry out (v. 9-12); the healing of racial strife and elimination of poverty and injustice that earthly governments struggle to solve (v. 13-14).

Jesus the Messiah is born! The Magi bring gifts from far off places (v. 10; Matthew 2: 11) and the church is established with different races unifying (Ephesians 2: 11-22); and the needy were helped (Acts 2: 44-45, 4: 32-36).

God sent His one and only Son to become flesh and made His dwelling among us, so that we may see the Kingdom of God!

Prayer: Grant, O Lord, that the course of this world may be so peaceably ordered by your governance, that your people may joyfully serve you in all godly quietness¹. Amen.

¹Thomas Cranmer, *Collects of Thomas Cranmer*, p. 78

Friday, December 3, 2021

Luke 1: 5-25

Written by: Christopher Williams

First Congregational Church of Fresno/

Grace Community Church, UCC North Fork

In our scripture, Zechariah is in a bit of a pickle. While tending to some incense in the temple, he is visited by none other than Mr. Archangel of the Lord, Gabriel, in all of his angelic glory. As you might guess, this would truly be a terrifying experience for anyone to have. The angel informs Zechariah that he and his wife will be blessed with a son, and not just any son, but one that would be both a joy and a delight to him and his wife Elizabeth. One that will bring people to God, one that will have the spirit of Elijah, and make the people ready for the coming of the Lord.

If an angel of God had visited one of us, it's easy to think that we might buy into everything that they tell us without question. After all, it is not every day that such things happen. But Zechariah is not someone who is swayed so easily. He has been around the bend once or twice. Zechariah is like that State Farm commercial. He knows a thing or two because he's seen a thing or two. Because of his wife's and his advanced age, he questions the Angel. "Are you sure about this?"

Poor Zechariah. As the Jester tells the King in Shakespeare's tragedy, King Lear, "thou shouldst not have been old, till thou hadst been wise". If Zechariah had been keeping score, this is not the first such prophecy of its kind. Abraham was 100 years old when God blessed he and Sarah's union with Isaac.

Perhaps I am being too hard on Zechariah? Maybe Zechariah's problem is not weak faith in God, but rather weak faith in himself. Many of us can relate to this. Who are we to deserve such miracles and such blessings in our lives? Zechariah is struck mute for his lack of faith, but after all that, what the Angel tells him comes to pass, and he is able to praise God in full audible, because God has shown Zechariah that he is worthy.

When blessings grace our doorstep, we must realize that we are worthy of such things because we are all worthy of God's love and blessings. We must also walk that fine line of humility with these blessings because while Zechariah and his wife were blessed with a child, this child would later become John the Baptist, and he belonged not just to the elderly couple, but to the world.

Saturday, December 4, 2021

Matthew 1: 18-25

Written by: Rev. Ara Guekguezian

Wellspring Community, Bakersfield

Joseph, being a righteous person, is always seeking to do the right thing, as he has been taught. He is a member of a culture that has codified righteous action for most any circumstance, including righteous behavior, if you receive news that your betrothed is pregnant and ‘Joseph, you are not the father.’ Doing the right thing has been inculcated from the outside in and very deep.

Joseph knew the context: social, religious, economic, political, cultural. He was ready to do the right thing, quickly, kindly, and completely. In verse 20 we hear, ‘He resolved to do this.’

And then he slept on it. A very good idea.

While sleeping, an angel appears in his dream. And there is a new context, planted very deeply inside his brain, psyche, heart and soul. There is now a new righteous action, internally generated. Joseph, being a righteous person (back to the beginning in verse 19), takes Mary as his wife and is father to God with us.

We know how to act in church, at a restaurant, at school and work. We know how to act in society. We were taught well. Then we are confronted by a momentous decision. It seems difficult. It calls for courage. Life will change from plan, but we have been told, we have learned to do the right thing. Sleep on it. Dream and wake up to do the right thing. It may be the exact same action as planned. Or it may be an action that moves you, me and us to a fuller righteousness, a fuller humanity. The God who comes does not change, but we ought to, as even in our exalted position, it is neither perfect nor fully human.

Prayer: Spirit of God, visit us in our sleep and dreams. Stay with us, that we may be courageous enough to act in a clearer righteous way. That we may live more abundant life.

Longing

Sunday, December 5, 2021

Malachi 3: 1-4

Written by: Kim Williams

Grace Community Church, UCC North Fork

In today's reading we hear about the messenger who is preparing the way of the Lord. A few interesting facts about Malachi: First, this is the last book of the Old Testament. It is not in chronological order, however, with when it is assumed to have been written—which would put it somewhere around Ezra and Nehemiah. Next, Malachi is translated as “My Messenger” or “His Messenger” and is probably not the name of the prophet. At the end of the book of Malachi, the messenger is revealed to be Elijah, who will be sent before the day of the Lord. In the New Testament, the messenger is also John the Baptist.

Can multiple things be true at once? Can the messenger be the prophet “Malachi” and Elijah and John the Baptist all at the same time? What is truth, anyway? What does it mean to be a messenger? Do we have messengers among us today? How can we be messengers, preparing the way for the Lord?

Prayer: *Composer of divine messages, Help us to receive messages, the multiple possibilities, and the manifold ways that you reach out to us to prepare the way. Let the divine word into our hearts so that we may live in a way that is continuously preparing us to encounter you. Let us act justly so that we may continue to echo your messages in all our actions. Amen*

Monday, December 6, 2021

Revelation 21: 1-6

Written by: Jean Yang

United Japanese Christian Church, Clovis

When we speak of death, I tend to have an image of someone who is not breathing and does not have a heartbeat. I think of that as the end of life.

Consider though, instead of death as an end, perhaps look at it as a beginning. A beginning to a greater life. It brings things around full circle. God is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End.

I think of this as my own father has recently passed. He no longer lives among us; yet he continues to have life, a life everlasting. He lives in heaven now. He was declining in his old life; suffering with illnesses. In the new heaven he has entered, he no longer suffers. Death will be no more.

I saw his struggle to reach his eternal address. He would call out for “water” or “cold water” towards the end of his days. When he was able, I would offer sips of ice water. It would help quench his earthly thirst. I could see that it was satisfying to him. But thirst can go beyond the physical needs; thirst can also be a strong desire for something.

My father missed my mother who had passed in 2020. I knew he desired to be reunited with her. I also knew he wanted to be relieved of the discomfort of physical thirst. He continued on his journey home. My father’s greatest thirst was for God. This thirst would allow dad his beginning and not his end.

As he approached his last hours, I would talk to him and pray over him. I would remind him that soon he would thirst no more. Soon he would drink from the well of living water. He would be relieved from that physical need for fluids. I prayed it would be replaced with a profound peace.

He went quietly on a Monday evening. I hope my words allowed him that comfort on his earthly journey, and guidance to his new heaven to be reunited with my mom. His ending was really just his beginning. Dad would be part of God’s new heaven; the Alpha and Omega, all encompassing.

Tuesday, December 7, 2021

Mark 1: 1-8

Written by: Rev. Raygan Baker

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Forest bathing is a growing practice that's being prescribed for stress management and mental wellness. Despite its name, it doesn't involve swimming or even getting wet, but just immersing one's self in the forest. The practice, as an intentional, mindful engagement with nature began in Japan in the 1980s (where it's called "Shinrin-yoku"), and has grown and spread around the world. The Association of Nature and Forest Therapy describes it like this:

"Forest Therapy is a relational practice that brings people into deeper intimacy with natural places. And one of those natural places is our natural self; it's a practice that holds the possibility of meeting again the kernel of who we are, and what we are born to be and how we are intended to be of service in the world. It's also important to recognize how the practice supports every aspect of our well-being."

There is a voice crying out from the wilderness, and our bodies and souls are crying out for the wilderness. Fortunately for us, the season of Advent and the many preparations for Christmas turn our world upside-down and inside out. The Good News comes to us not from an institution or authority that has a political agenda, but from the wilderness; to remind us again who and whose we are.

As we make preparations for Christmas and deck the halls, we bring forests of Christmas Trees inside and bathe our homes in their light and joy. How might these trees invite us once again to recall "the kernel of who we are, and what we are born to be and how we are intended to be of service in the world?"

Prayer: Holy One, this Advent, show us once again how you have enfolded us into our own places in the Christmas Story. Amen.

Wednesday, December 8, 2021

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

Written by: Rev. Dr. Norman Broadbent

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Who am "I"? That sounds like a philosophical question, but in the case of Isaiah 61, it is also a literary one. We tend to read ancient texts by overlooking the role of the narrator's voice and how it shapes our own relationship to the text. The message in Isaiah 61 is clear enough: comfort and joy! In fact, it was the basis for a hymn I wrote years ago, "God Makes All Things New," written to be used in the ordination service of a seminary classmate who had overcome challenging personal odds to reach this poignant moment. Isaiah 61 expands the images of comfort, reward, and restoration.

Who is the person who is speaking in this passage, however, and whom does this speaker address? In the context of Advent, we would probably assert that this is Christ, while "we" identify with the "we." Jesus brings US comfort and turns OUR mourning into joy. The gospel of John depicts Jesus claiming the role of a similar voice in the wilderness, quoting Isaiah 40:3. But is this the text's only or even primary meaning?

In the second half of the reading in Isaiah 61:8-11, the speaker becomes an agent for justice. The audience for the speech disappears, and the target audience in the final verse is no longer the restored community, but the foreign nations- that is, outsiders. The message of the Bible is not always that easy. It rarely casts its audience as the righteous group.

Throughout the prophetic texts related to the exile, such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the elite deserve divine vengeance for their lack of righteousness. If this poem is directed to this returning group of former elites, perhaps they are the ones who are purposefully called to serve the mourners, the captives, the oppressed.

Rather than hearing these words as exaltation of a deity who serves my needs, we should hear them as divine command to go out and bring healing to our broken world. Or, to put it in Advent language, we are called to be Christ to others. The point of the Incarnation is not to distance Jesus from us, but rather the opposite. The Incarnation asks us to see ourselves as the image and likeness of God, to whom has been given the caretaking of this world (Genesis 1:26). In that capacity, the image is a charge to act justly within this world of injustice, violence, prejudice, and oppression. We are not so much Christ's image when we triumph as when we serve.

As an Advent text, Isaiah 61 is not just about the ability and desire of God to heal human wounds. It is also a call to be the bodies through whom divine justice becomes a reality, not just within our own immediate, intimate communities, but to the whole world. It is what some are ordained into ministry to fulfill, as "God Makes All Things New!"

Thursday, December 9, 2021

Isaiah 11: 1-10

Written by: Rev. Akiko Miyake-Stoner

United Japanese Christian Church, Clovis

The Scripture text paints a picture of an ideal world, every creature living in peace, not giving into their natural instincts to take a bite out of their neighbor's rump, or pick off one of their young. It kind of reminds me of that part in the movie, "Finding Nemo," when the sharks have their support group and together they repeat over and over, "Fish are friends, not food," even when a little drop of blood comes wafting by one of their noses. In nature, this kind of thing just doesn't happen. Rev. Janet Hunt writes, "It's almost impossible to picture the things the prophet describes for they simply are not so. Wolves and lambs do not lie down together. Bears and cows do not eat side by side. Lions are anything but vegetarian. And no toddler would be allowed to venture anywhere near the hole of an asp. The stakes are too high. The consequence too great. It is in the very nature of the snake to strike, the wolf to feast, the lion to enjoy a regular meal of red meat. All must eat, and like it or not, it is in the natural order of things for the menagerie Isaiah describes today to rely on one another in a predatory way for their survival. And yet, Isaiah uses these opposites to paint a picture of a time when it will all be different." Indeed, if we take this image Isaiah puts out, not literally, but explore its sentiments, it makes a little more sense.

Ultimately, this Scripture text gives us a glimpse of the world we want to live in, not in terms of undoing or ignoring natural ecosystems and food pyramids. In this passage from Isaiah, we receive a picture of life where natural predators and enemies rest together; this is a picture of the world where all are equal and live at peace with one another. The setting, feeling, and ethos of this passage capture God's hopes for us. In this passage, the prophet Isaiah gives voice to God's hopes and dreams and that we might be caught up in them and redeemed by them. This is what we long for in this Advent season.

Friday, December 10, 2021

Luke 1: 26-45

**Written by: Rev. Julia Penner-Zook
Community United Church of Christ**

Pulling Back the Curtain

she leans her head
against the doorframe
of the house, stooped
beneath a heavy
load of laundry
which had dried
in the desert sun.
she is spent.

days are now a
whirlwind of activity—
she has little time
for the frivolous things
she had treasured
before she was promised
in marriage to joseph.

she collapses
onto the edge of her bed,
staring into the dazzling
nighttime sky.

her face turns suddenly—
startled by an other-worldly
glow just behind her.

mary.

the sound of her name
startles her.

but the words
spoken after her
name! how can
words be both
soothing as honey
and terrifying as an
invading army?

she trembles
shrinking back.
she offers the only
conceivable response:

yes.

alone once more
she sits as if
fossilized—unable
to grasp the message
given to her. no sleep
comes before
morning's light begins
to creep over
distant hills.

as if roused from an
agonizing dream, her mind
is instantly alert.
she had given her *consent*—
if simple acceptance of
a prediction could
be classified as such.

could she have said *no*?
her shoulders shake—
almost as if she
hopes this shudder will
shake off the tumultuous
thoughts that now plague her.
she must find a way forward
for now there is no
turning back—she had
agreed to the impossible.

she remembers her cousin.

warm embrace greets her
in this welcoming place.
somehow a startling, mighty pronouncement
comes from deep within *her own* soul,
words sputter from her lips,
tears flow as if they had been
stopped up since birth.

how could this be?
she feels cornered. trapped.
how can her God
drop an utterly daunting,
life-altering mission
into her lap. *she* is
hardly more than a child.

she weeps. she laughs.
she speaks freely within
this comforting space.
her bitter venom spewed at
the absurdity of this message
is absorbed without question;
her fear of what this will
require of her acknowledged
with no judgment.

day gives way to night
then sunlight creeps back again.
she loses count of how many times
this cycle repeats nor does
she understand how it happens
that her heart calms.

over time the gift of space
to grieve, reflect, and heal open
a deep pool of serenity within her soul.

seasons come, change,
repeat, she begins to
comprehend that she is carried.
she will always be carried.

Saturday, December 11, 2021

Isaiah 2: 1-5

Written by: Peter Wall

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Today's text from Isaiah 2 is particularly challenging to me as a modern reader.

This text presents an enticing vision of a pacified world: swords are beaten into plowshares and spears are beaten into pruning hooks. Nations no longer learn or practice warfare.

Most of us yearn for peace. Sometimes I hear people affect an attitude of world-weariness to say that violence is just a fact of life that will never go away. But I doubt that anyone really wants the world to work that way. This is not the difficult part of the text.

But how is peace accomplished in Isaiah's vision? By all nations turning their attention to the temple in Jerusalem, and going there so that the God of Jacob may teach his ways. This is the difficult part of the text. And that is because it reads easily as a kind of religious monoculture where everyone is the same, and everyone walks the same paths. It does not sit well with me in a world of religious diversity.

I grew up in a tradition where the hope of Advent was explicitly and unambiguously a hope for a monoculturally Christian world. And there are still a lot of people who share that vision and expectation for a world where everyone is converted to the same Christianity.

That is no longer the hope of Advent for me, but I recognize it. I think that I see a flavor of it in the text from Isaiah for today. And this ancient impulse to imagine a world where peace can only happen when everyone is the same is still afoot in our world today.

We have a careful balance to strike with texts like this. We have our own tradition, with all of its problems. Others have their own traditions, with their own problems. We are like different elder trees, having grown up in different ground. We have unique gnarls from distinct histories. How can we live together as one forest and still keep our roots?

For my practice, the first thing to do is to recognize the challenges in texts like this. Then, instead of discarding them, we must learn to grow with them.

As we finish this second week of Advent, on the theme of "Longing," this text challenges us to consider carefully what we might be longing for. How do you imagine peace?

Imagining

Sunday, December 12, 2021

Zephaniah 3: 14-20

Written by: Janice Hill

Tulare First Congregational Church

A friend once asked what my favorite scripture was, and I immediately replied, Zephaniah 3:17. The next thing I knew, I was gifted with a black granite paperweight engraved with that scripture. I look at it often and it still brings me to tears.

The thought of God exulting over me [I put myself in the place of Jerusalem] with singing is almost more than my simple mind can comprehend. Having been raised believing God was stern and angry, how wonderful it is to know God isn't looking to see what I did wrong, but rather full of love and joy, singing over me. Do I see God as not caring about what I do? Absolutely not! I trust God to let me know what is best for me. But out of love, not anger.

This has turned my entire spiritual life around. God is Love!!! I am God's beloved child, even when I mess up. I trust God, not out of fear. I trust God because of God's faithfulness and knowing I AM LOVED! And that is Good News!!!!

*Prayer: Holy One, help me remember that you love me despite my failings. Thank you, thank you.
Amen*

Monday, December 13, 2021

John 1: 6-8, 19-28

Written by: Eleanor Dote

New Abbey, Pasadena

“Come to Jesus, I urge you,” the pastor proclaimed from the main platform that evening. “Come with your sin; come with your brokenness — and let Jesus make you whole. He can do that for you tonight; if you just come.”

It was 1996, and before I knew it, I was walking with thousands of other people forward at the invitation that was being given at the stadium that night. I prayed to receive Jesus into my heart — reciting the prayer as instructed — and began a life that would become zealous for God. Or at least what I thought was God.

Those expectations would be shattered in 2008 when burnout hit while in a ministry position in Northern California.

“Why?,” I cried to God. “I did everything I thought I was supposed to do.”

But the silence continued, and it wasn’t long before I found myself packing my things and leaving behind the dreams I had of spending the rest of my life in full time ministry, not to mention in church at all.

Expectations often let us down. They disappointed the people in Jesus’ day. And they continue to disappoint us as we look for something to trust in; some sort of stronghold to grasp that will help give us a sense of certainty about what’s to come. Yet, it’s important to remember, as Rachel Held Evans puts it, “the opposite of faith is certainty.”

Mary and Joseph had no clue what was to come. They weren’t given assurance of how God would take care of them; they only trusted that He would. John the Baptist didn’t know what was to come; he only knew that something bigger was coming — and his job was to point the way so that people would pay attention.

But we don’t want faith. We want certainty. It’s why we vote for people and then find ourselves frustrated when politicians let us down, isn’t it? And for the people who saw John the Baptist, they weren’t happy about being told that they needed to wait. That for as much as they wanted John the Baptist to be the messiah they were looking for — a person who would save them in the way that they wanted from the Roman oppression — he wasn’t the one. And the answer disappointed them.

Yet, when Jesus DID come, He wasn’t what they expected either, was He? Perhaps it’s time to start taking a moment to lessen our expectations about what could be, and take the time this Advent season to focus on what is, trusting that God is continuing to work all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called to His purpose.

Tuesday, December 14, 2021

Isaiah 9: 1-7

Written by: Kim Williams

Grace Community Church, UCC North Fork

What imagination does it take to hope beyond struggle? I have had ~~days~~ weeks months when I have been in the depths of despair. Depression has a way of silencing hope, of dimming imagination. Perhaps you know what I'm talking about. Perhaps this has been a difficult season, and every glimmering light display in your neighborhood is in sharp contrast to the deep darkness that the egg nog and carols cannot seem to penetrate. And yet, it is from a landscape of anguish that this message of hope rises. Things will be hard. They have been hard. Isaiah does not negate the gloom, the burden, the pain of one's homeland being swallowed whole by Assyrian forces. There is not any toxic *positive vibes only* rhetoric. Instead, there is a promise to those who have been, are, and will be encountering struggles. Even though it may be difficult to imagine the shape of hope in the moment, it is on the horizon. The hard parts are not negated, this struggle is valid, and God can imagine beyond the tunnel-vision of our suffering.

Wednesday, December 15, 2021

Isaiah 62: 6-12

Written by: Peter Wall

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Understanding the setting of Isaiah 62 can help make it more meaningful when we read it today.

In long decline of their monarchy, the leaders of the descendants of Israel continually forgot the ways that were handed down by Moses from Mount Sinai. The result was a toppling of Israel by foreign invaders. Many of the Jewish people were carried off to Babylon. Their city, Jerusalem, was destroyed. For decades they lived in exile.

But here, in Isaiah 62, they have returned. They are rebuilding Jerusalem. They are so intent on the work of rebuilding that they don't even allow God to rest. (Verses 6–7.) And the prophet speaks, in words with the weight of the divine. Here is the vision that animates the restoration: "I will never again give your grain as food for your enemies. Foreigners won't drink your wine for which you labored. Those who harvest will eat it." (Verses 8–9.)

It is a simple vision: we will have our own bread, and our own wine, by our own labor; these things will not be taken away.

Some of the imagery here almost makes me cringe. They are building walls. They are keeping out foreigners. But I am bringing too much of my own baggage. These are traumatized people. And what do you do with traumatized people? You feed them, you shelter them, and you give them a place where they are safe from their tormentors.

And this, in turn, makes me wonder whether anyone's visions of Paradise, a New Jerusalem, Heaven, Utopia, or Salvation have ever been very different? Don't they all stem from trauma?

The trouble is that trauma relieved is only the halfway house on the Way to Salvation. Entering into the safe place, with shelter, bread, and wine is not the end of the story. Final healing only begins to happen when we are able to imagine what comes next. Maybe you can imagine your suffering relieved. But can you imagine a world without suffering at all? This, to me, is the challenge of Advent.

Thursday, December 16, 2021

Hebrews 1: 1-12

Written by: Rev. Akiko Miyake-Stoner

United Japanese Christian Church, Clovis

As UCC folks, we proudly proclaim “God is still speaking.” The question is...are we still listening?

God loves to speak. In the Bible, the prophets are God’s mouthpiece. God has talked with our ancestors and been in relationship with us, through people like Moses, Deborah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Samuel.

Yet, throughout history, humans have had a difficult time listening to God. Even if we did listen, we have forgotten what God has said. Or we may have actively disobeyed God’s call. Through all God’s talking, we stopped listening. Today, it’s not hard to see the implications of our closed ears: Creation is suffering. There are entire populations who are hungry. War rages on. Hate and prejudice run rampant. Violence is commonplace. All these things make it clear we’re not listening to God.

And yet, God continues to speak. God continues to want to be in relationship with us. And so, God tried another way of getting God’s messages to us: by coming to us in the form of a baby. This passage from Hebrews is lofty in tone and grand in imagery...and yet it points to this very simple, sweet message: that God wanted to continue the conversation, so God decided to try something new. God decided to join us in the flesh to share in our joys and sorrows, to teach us about the Kingdom of God, to demonstrate what living out the 2 greatest commandments looks like.

There are all kinds of jokes about “selective hearing.” The popular definition refers to people only hearing what they want to hear or what’s important to them. Scientifically, “selective hearing” refers to the “cocktail party effect:” that even in a noisy setting, a person can hear a single person’s voice.

In our lives of faith, how tempting it is to practice selective hearing in the first sense: to place other things as more important than listening for God. Therefore, how important it is to practice selective hearing in the second sense: in the midst of all the noise and distraction in our lives, to seek the still, small voice of God and be anchored and committed to hearing its messages to us? If we want to know what God is saying, all we need to do is look at the example of Jesus. As we continue along this Advent journey, how will you listen for what God is saying?

Friday, December 17, 2021

Matthew 2: 13-23

Written by: Christopher Williams

First Congregational Church of Fresno/

Grace Community Church, UCC North Fork

In our text, Jesus is born, but things are looking dicey for the Holy Family. Herod is looking for the newborn savior, and Joseph is warned of such by an angel who tells Joseph to flee to Egypt. Joseph packs up Mary and Jesus and strikes out for Egypt before first light, where he stays until Herod dies.

Can one imagine how Joseph felt? Not long before this time, he was an upper middle-class tradesman and well-respected member of Jewish society. Now, he is a fugitive packing up his family and escaping to Egypt just after Christmas. This has got to be the worst post-advent season in history. It's definitely the first.

We make a great deal of Mary, and we should. She is after all the Blessed Virgin and the Holy Mother, and the Queen of Heaven, but we don't usually speak much on Joseph and that is just a shame in my opinion. Here is a guy that was simply going to get married, and is told by an Angel that his wife to be is already pregnant, but he should marry her anyhow. He shrugs it off and marries her. He's told to flee his homeland with his new family and strike out for Egypt. He does it without question.

God has entrusted the care of His child with Joseph because He knows that Joseph is special. Joseph knows that this child is not his, but he will treat this child as his because that is what good stepparents do. For centuries, it has been fashionable to bash the stepparents. I personally blame the Brothers Grimm, but stepparents are out there out there on the front lines, loving, and supporting their partner's children as their own, and that is a service truly blessed by God.

While Joseph could not see the fullness of God's plan throughout this ordeal, he knew that His plan would lead to great things and remained faithful to the cause. Likewise, we also cannot see the greatness of God's plan, but are assured that all will be revealed. If that plan is to love and protect one's family, who can argue otherwise?

Saturday, December 18, 2021

Jeremiah 31: 27-34

Written by: Rev. Dr. Norman Broadbent

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Seasons are as much a cultural phenomenon as food, music, religion and dance. In reality, the delineation of the year into four seasons—Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter— is as arbitrary as if they were started on the first of a certain month. Advent falls in what is still (common calendar-wise) our season of fall. But Advent within our Christian framework, is a season all its own. It is in this Advent season that Jeremiah 31: 27-34 lands in our Advent season lectionary.

This Advent season has a parallel cultural phenomenon in music, we have a number of traditional hymns in our pew hymnals as testimonies to our Advent waiting and anticipation. Jeremiah 31:27-34 is a kind of song to the richness of an anticipated renewal in the incarnation of Jesus, wrapped in the affirmation of a new covenant with God.

Rev. Carolyn Winfrey Gillette has interpreted these verses from Jeremiah and created lyric that can be sung to the familiar Doxology tune, “Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow.” With her permission, you are invited to sing this new Advent Season hymn of covenant anticipation:

The Days Are Coming, Said the Lord

OLD HUNDREDTH 8.8.8.8 (Traditional Doxology)

*"The days are coming," said the Lord,
"When I will bring in something new.
My people now reject my word
So look and see what I will do."
"I'll write my words upon the heart,
And I will put my law in them.
Though they have wavered from the start,
My people will return again."
O God, this law that is within
Becomes the means by which we're free.
No longer bound by human sin,
In Christ, we're who we're called to be.
In every broken, hurting place,
Our hearts know what it means to yearn.
We hear your promised love and grace;
Now at Christ's birth may we return.*

Tune: OLD HUNDREDTH Louis Bourgeois (1551) from Old Genevan Psalter

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Discovering

Sunday, December 19, 2021

Micah 5: 2-5a

Written by: Kim Williams

Grace Community Church, UCC North Fork

When you picture a leader, what do you think of? Feel free to jot some of your initial thoughts down here:

I wish I could see what you wrote down, that would make this part much more fun on my end. As you think about the qualities you wrote down, I ask you to think about how they uphold outdated and oppressive systems. Do they? Maybe not, like I said, I can't see your list. But I'm willing to bet there are a few that might even fall directly under a category or two in the list of characteristics of white supremacy culture. Which are: either/or thinking, worship of the written word, objectivity, individualism, quantity over quality, power hoarding, fear of open conflict, a sense of urgency, fear, defensiveness, paternalism, progress=bigger, belief in one right way, right to comfort, and perfectionism.

Note that none of these qualities is present in the prophetic description of a messianic leader that we find in Micah. Instead, we find someone who is likened to a shepherd. Someone who makes sure that everyone in the flock lives a secure and safe life. This isn't done through excellent public speaking with a booming voice, or by having the ability to work well under pressure *and* multitask *and* being a superbly punctual self-starter, or even by creating the most impressive end-of-year annual report showing astronomical growth. This security doesn't come from armed guards at every entry point, or in displays of bravado and intimidation. Instead, this is achieved by peace. Not just peaceful means, but by *being* one of peace.

Prayer: May we nurture, develop, and support our leaders to follow the way of this messianic model of leadership, and may we learn to divorce ourselves from expectations of our leaders that prop up injustice. Amen.

Monday, December 20, 2021

Luke 1: 26-38

Written by: Peter Wall

First Congregational Church of Fresno

If you are like me, then the season of Advent and Christmas is one where you wish for a little more elasticity in the passage of time. Could we slow things down a little? Do clocks and calendars need to keep marching along at the same brisk tempo?

There is a place in the scripture reading for today where I wonder whether time slows down for Mary, in the moment of the Annunciation. This is a moment that has been depicted many times in the art of the last two millennia, especially since the Middle Ages. Usually there are two figures, Mary and the angel Gabriel. In most versions, Mary is on the right and Gabriel is on the left. They are usually indoors. Very often Mary's head is bowed, and her face is downcast. Has time slowed down in this moment?

Gabriel appears to Mary in verse 28 with the famous greeting, "Hail, favored one, the Lord is with you!"

Mary says nothing, and the storyteller pauses.

All we know about Mary so far in the story is that she is in a city called Nazareth, she is a virgin, she is betrothed to someone named Joseph, and Gabriel has appeared and said, "Hail, favored one, the Lord is with you!"

But before the story continues with Gabriel's announcement, the storyteller says (in verse 29):

"And she was greatly distressed at his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."

How long does it take to ponder? And why is Gabriel waiting to speak again? Has time slowed down?

I imagine Mary in this long moment with her head bowed and her face downcast, as depicted in all those works of art. This is the moment before Mary knows—and before the reader of the gospel knows—what will happen. She has not yet conceived Jesus, and neither have we.

What should we be pondering today?

Tuesday, December 21, 2021

1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24

Written by: Norma Uragami

United Japanese Christian Church, Clovis

As I write my devotional this Advent season, I look forward to the Holy Birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. My writing is set for December 21st, just 4 days before Christmas Day. Despite the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, I'm sure my heart will be excited for this wondrous yet poignant event in history. This Holy Child is a gift from God for us to rejoice and cherish always. We should continually pray and give thanks, for this is God's will.

That being said, we are in the midst of waiting for Christmas. As Christian believers, the same anticipation is in comparison to the "Last Day" as we wait for Jesus to come again.

God wants us to give thanks in all His blessings and circumstances. We should never turn away from God's will for us. We should hold onto the good and avoid evil doings. By doing so, we'll truly have peace of mind and be blameless for the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. What a wonderful feeling to have in our hearts during this Advent season. Our greatest most special gift from God is truly His Son Jesus Christ! (I love you Jesus... Amen!)

Joy, prayer, and thanksgiving are things we have received through Jesus. We have been blessed with these divine gifts so we should cherish them every day of our lives.

God is aware of our sins and struggles of temptations. May our bodies and souls remain guilt free. Let us refocus on the goodness of life and our wholesome existence. Only then will we feel pure joy and sanctity. Keep the faith for Jesus is coming again!

Wednesday, December 22, 2021

Matthew 2: 1-12

Written by: Rev. Raygan Baker

First Congregational Church of Fresno

2:1, 10-11 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem... When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The Peace of the Wild Things

When despair grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting for their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

- Wendell Berry

For me, the most reliable invitation to wonder is a clear night sky. Stargazing is how I relax into the grace of the cosmos, and Berry's reminder of their constant presence, even when they're crowded out by daylight, is a comfort. The most miraculous stars we've ever seen are right above us, they've done nothing to hide themselves, but we only see them when we get away from all the other lights and notifications that commandeer our attention.

The Magi, who devoted much time and attention to the night sky, learned of the birth of a foreign ruler not from the angels, nor even from the prophecies that Herod had overlooked, but by following the stars. Astrology was not a Jewish practice or body of knowledge. In fact, the practice of "divining the heavens" is seen as a sinister threat in the Torah and in the prophets. Yet somehow, this was still how the Magi knew of Christ's birth before Herod, and found their way to pay their respects to the newborn king. This Good News bursts forth, not just from the church and holy scriptures, but through all of Creation and even the cosmos, because nothing any smaller can contain it.

Today, invite yourself to go stargazing, and as you do, let yourself slip into the grace of the cosmos, and be free.

Thursday, December 23, 2021

Psalm 8

Written by: Erica Holland

First Congregational Church of Fresno

God is strength. God is power. God is beauty.

Nothing displays these sentiments more than gazing at the vast sky of stars above Camp Tamarack, or the majesty of Yosemite Falls. When I am walking through nature, I can feel God's love and creation all around me. It's easy to be a believer and praise God's name when looking out at a gorgeous view. But God's gorgeous creation can also make me feel small. How am I significant when standing next to a 200ft redwood tree? It was here long before me, and it will be here long after me. Well, at least we hope it will be.

Psalm 8 isn't just about glorifying God's name, It also discusses the power and glory of humans. God has given us "dominion" over the plants, the animals, the sky, and the sea. But as Marvel Comics taught us, "With great power comes great responsibility." God has trusted us to maintain God's kingdom and continue to glorify it, and frankly, I don't think we've been doing a very good job. Have we been complacent and avoiding our assignment? Or have we been in such a state panic, anxiety, depression, and grief over the past few years that thinking about the environment and caring for our world is just one more thing on our plates? Personally, I think the answer is both. We know we need to do something, but how many times can we answer the "call the action" before we're too burnt out to function?

Today, I challenge you, not to take extreme action, but simply to breathe. Walk through nature. Enjoy God's creation. And remember that God trusts you. God gave us this power, and this glory, because God believes in us. We do need to act and make meaningful change to preserve our world, but we also need to care for ourselves, and God is here to help. Then, when you are ready, and not before, jump back on that wagon because the fight is not over. God has got your back. Do you have God's?

Christmas Eve

Friday, December 24, 2021

Luke 2: 1-20

Written by: Peter Wall

First Congregational Church of Fresno

If you haven't read the passage from Luke for today, stop now and go read it.

If you are like me, then you have heard this story before, many times. Maybe you will read it again later today, or tomorrow.

When I was growing up, we opened our presents on Christmas morning, but not before somebody read this passage from Luke. That was a rule. And often that happened twice. First, at home with my dad and mom and my brothers, we would read it before opening presents. And then, maybe the same day in the afternoon, or maybe a couple days later, with my dad's extended family, we would do the same thing.

And you've probably heard the story the way Linus tells it in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, recited in that euphonious King James.

Think, too, about all the Christmas songs that elaborate on elements of this story: "Silent Night," "Away in a Manger," "Angels We Have Heard On High," "O Little Town of Bethlehem." (And many more.)

This story is deep in our Christmas bones.

Or is it?

Something extraordinary happens with this story, right out in the open. And it seems to get lost in all of the sentimental tenderness about "baby Jesus," and the loudness of the shepherds in their joy.

For the rest of the year, our image of God is adult and parental, zealously protective and dominant. We talk about God as utterly supreme—the highest of "higher powers"—in whom we live and move and have our being, upon whom all things and persons are utterly dependent.

But, on these days approaching Christmas, and during the days after, through Epiphany, all of this is reversed. Here is the image of God as a human baby, nursing to survive, imperiled in a time and place with high rates of infant mortality, and fully dependent upon other people.

What does that mean? Here is Mary, traditionally thought to be only around 14 years old, leading the way: when God is your child, rather than your parent, it is time to grow up. Everyone around her is amazed and excited by something new. "But Mary kept all these things in her heart, pondering them."

How should we carry this image of the dependent, nursing, imperiled God into the rest of our year together?

Christmas Day

Saturday, December 25, 2021

John 1: 1-14

Written by: Carol Lawson-Swezey

United Japanese Christian Church, Clovis

“Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

The past two years have been a dark and challenging time, not only for us as Christians, but for the world as a broken whole. We have been torn apart by fear of a virus, which seems to take on many ominous, menacing and evolving shapes and still seems nowhere close to being gone. We have been wedged apart by our political and ethical stands, both sides proud, and arrogant, and unable to give in, nor give up. Battling friends, agitated families, and brother against brother, much like Cain and Able in the beginning of time.

We often see each other as adversaries in the fight for survival, concentrating on what we perceive as unfathomable and irreconcilable differences, rather than our mutual longing for love and acceptance, humanity and tolerance.

Whether we are Republican or Democrats, devout Christians or rabid Atheists, conservatives or white hot liberals, we are all flesh and blood, children of a greater God, who wants us all to get along.

In John 1:1-14, the good book speaks: “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

In the past year, I have sought solace and peace while sitting in my backyard, listening to the chirping of birds, who never give up and never stop their joyous song. I listen to the wind whispering in the falling leaves and experience the warmth of the sun peeking out from behind the nearby foothills. I often end my meditation by singing softly (so as not to scare the neighbors), several of my favorite songs, “Amazing Grace” and “This Little Light of Mine”.

“Amazing Grace” grants me balance and comfort, and “This Little Light” infuses me with joy and spirit, much like when I learned it as a child many years ago. The lyrics, “*this little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine, let it shine.*” Such simple words with such profound meaning.

It reminds me of my many blessings, and that in God there is light and the light shines in the darkness and the darkness shall not overcome it.

Can we hear an Amen? Amen!

